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# Preface: probing the boundaries of media ecology

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## Probing the Boundaries of Media Ecology

### Preface

This special double issue of EME has come to fruition thanks to a number of people, including Robert Logan, who initiated the conversation about a potential special issue; Paul Grosswiler, the Editor-in-Chief who graciously offered the space for the special issues; and Peter Zhang and Robert MacDougall, who put together two panels for the MEA Annual Convention held at Manhattan College in 2012 featuring “Other” media ecologists. The title resulted from a conversation with Corey Anton, and thanks of course to all the contributors who ventured beyond the “usual suspects” in their media ecological explorations. At this moment, we’re already working toward a follow-up issue.

Regular readers of this journal don't need to be reminded that Media Ecology is rooted in the recognition that....(may or may not want to insert a standard blurb here, like the stuff up on the ME web site - a quote or two from Postman or Lance, or some such)..

Essentially, the scholars we are talking about here are or were for the most part thinkers at the vanguard, more often at the margins or in between disciplines, and certainly pushing envelopes, straining definitions and categorizations. Many did their work without any secure intellectual home. This certainly made things tough for a few of them (as it has for some of us) – but also opened up huge vistas denied traditional academic thinkers often rigidly bound by arbitrary compartmentalizations within their discipline and their academic departments with all of the epistemological framing and constraining those entail. The upshot of this, I think, is that we are seeing a new science in the making. Perhaps its just biology writ large – not sure – but it is almost certainly a thread of some larger, holistic, system-wide systems science of life, communications and the effects of technology that is being slowly articulated.

This entire project is driven by the realization that authors outside of the familiar media ecology/MEA pantheon have written substantively and copiously about human communication and the impacts of technology with a systemic outlook. Whether or not there were

explicitly engaging "standard" media ecological problematics, explicitly engaging and unpacking their work has brought fresh and valuable insights. The hope is that this can also help update, extend and expand the scope of media ecology – its epistemic frames, its methodologies, and its ontological outlook regarding, in particular, what it means to be human.

It is our belief that as an informed disposition and a mode of exploration into the human condition, the media ecological sensibility did not come to us ex nihilo. It emerged out of a larger ground dispersed across both space and time, made up of numerous mutually resonating and interanimating intellectual traditions, and that, other than its North American permutation, this sensibility undoubtedly emerged elsewhere too, albeit in different guises.

It seems high time that we treat media ecology as an acoustic phenomenon, with centers everywhere and margins nowhere. If the academic study of communication and the impacts of technology is sometimes referred to as the discipline without a discipline, then media ecology is still an emerging meta-discipline.

Exploration is the media ecologist's impetus and lifeblood and the intellectual probe is our primary tool. To be sure, the doing of media ecology requires a sustained intellectual nomadism and should always induce a kind of vertigo. It is precisely our purpose to bring into focus some of the resonating intervals such nomadism helps to catalyze and create.

Perhaps, then, we are engaged in a project that is akin to a kind of 'urban planning for gypsies'. The notion indeed sounds strange, but even nomads need a place to call home every now and then. A place to go to, to get away from the din, to rest, to recharge, to re-member, to reinvigorate with new ideas, new minds. ....that is one aim of this new collection of essays. And yet no house is ever really complete unless all who belong are home.

We remain fully aware that this double issue must fall short of what the title promises, since media ecology is, as Christine Nystrom puts it, "a pre-paradigmatic discipline," without boundary – a discipline without a certain or specific discipline. To be sure, the more

intellectual terrains we explore, the more we are compelled to explore still further. Still, it is never too early to initiate something that aspires to embody McLuhan's own mode of inquiry, which is characterized by figure/ground reversal and the reversal of cause and effect, mode switching (e.g., from an eye mode to an ear mode), pattern recognition, rendering visible the invisible, among other things.

This project is necessarily open-ended and unfinished. We could go all the way back to the Pre-Socratics, to the immemorial I Ching, to the ancient Taoists, to contemporary Zen masters, to artists and quantum physicists, to authors of children's literature such as Dr. Seuss, to mischievous mathematicians such as Lewis Carroll, to idiosyncratic geometricians such as Benoît B. Mandelbrot, to science fiction writers such as Philip K. Dick -- the list goes on. We take this as a reassuring sign that we are working in a fascinating field, with the possibility for a thousand plateaus, and much more.

As such, while facing our own limitations, we try to be as inclusive as we can and as space permits in putting together this collection and the follow-up issue, assured that the intervals and intersections created between the articles are invaluable in and of themselves because they are precisely the sites for further exploration.

This special double issue will introduce a coterie of authors through the lens of media ecology, including...

I THEN KIND OF LIKE WHAT DAVID DEACIN SUGGESTS HERE, FROM HIS:

Holism, communion and conversion: integrating media consumption and production research (Article in English) MEDIA CULTURE AND SOCIETY; VOL 25; PART 2; 209-232; 2003

He writes:

[E]mpirical divisibility should not become a pretext for theoretical isolationism, in which attendance to the complexity of one phase is used to justify disregard for the other. "Holism" is essentially a mindset, in which specialization should be seen as the basis for greater theoretical integration rather than a barrier to it." (p. 209).

And so we have an opportunity here to stake out a new intellectual home for new thinkers coming down the pike.

We could then include a brief discussion of the “meta-disciplinary and pre-paradigmatic” flavor of media ecology to date – as initially described by Chris Nystrom:

On Media Ecology (from opening section of my book *Digination* that we could grab or morph passages from if desired).

In any case, I plan to devote much of the coming week to wrapping up the preface to this special issue. Including the section that introduces each of the articles.

As practitioners in the “master discipline” of biology—the science of life—biologists are interested in where organisms originate, how they maintain their structure and function, how they grow and propagate, and how they have evolved and continue to evolve over time, or die off. Logan (2007) has called for an explicit biological approach to help systemize the broad area of theory and research that is media ecology, an interdisciplinary field that typically combines elements of biology, philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, computer science, anthropology, sociology, history, and economics, along with cultural studies, technology studies, and media studies. Media ecology has been dubbed a “meta-discipline” and still remains a “preparadigmatic science” (Nystrom, 1973). As a meta-discipline, media ecology is an expansive, integrative, over-seeing approach that seeks to find the many sensible but often subtle connections between ostensibly disparate modes of analyses concerning equally disparate subject matter. This is done in an effort to draw out the contours and consequences of an almost infinite combination of human-media interfaces and fusions with technology.

However, as preparadigmatic scientists, media ecologists still do not, “as yet, have a coherent framework in which to organize their subject matter or their questions” (ibid). This collection of essays is part of that collective project to which Nystrom refers: an effort to help organize things. While I will not cull on specific biological principles in any systematic way throughout the various chapters, I will periodically point to the manner in which much of our intermingling with communication technologies of various kinds has a morphological

and therefore evolutionary component to it. That is to say, we are changing something about ourselves as we continue to invent, integrate, and inhabit digital artifacts, processes, systems, and procedures. Consider, as a superficial (physical) example, the way thumbs have become the primary digit used to manipulate the standard phone keypad game controller, and miniature keyboard for so many in our younger generations. More significantly, perhaps, we should consider how the cell phone's memory has taken over most of the function of the biological memory with regard to recalling even the most frequently called numbers. Since biology includes the study of life functions and processes within and between organisms interacting in their environments, a biological approach might be a particularly good way to understand these kinds of phenomena. Again, while periodic reference to biological terms and concepts will be made throughout this book, the biological is not being marshaled in order to make any essentialist or naturalistic claims about the status of certain groups of people or technologies. Nor will I highlight any particular group of people using certain technologies as the ones to follow. Instead, drawing on survey, ethnographic, archival, and participant-research data, I proceed in each chapter by making a series of observations on the particularities and idiosyncrasies of certain media-in-use that do at times appear to mimic biological patterns and processes. I admit to engaging in some inference and conjecture based upon the data, however I do so in an attempt to draw out the various practical benefits and constraints bound up in the technologies so many of us find ourselves not just employing, but in a very real sense integrating with every day. As detailed in the next chapter, a well-established foundation already exists for this way of thinking about technology. Marshall McLuhan popularized the systemic approach to understanding media and their interplay with culture and technology. However Harold Innis and McLuhan's other key intellectual mentor Lewis Mumford, along with a collection of thinkers working in as many disciplines, including Norbert Wiener (1948, 1950) and Jacques Ellul (1964) all proffered system-theoretic views regarding the human use of technology and, through reciprocal relation, the use of human beings by technology. In an excellent essay about Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* (1934) Andrew Jamison describes Mumford's systemtheoretic approach to understanding technology. I like the following passage, where Jamison does a nice job characterizing the ecological and ultimately

biological framing of Mumford's work.

(I like the Mumford nod from Jamison here as a way to describe the interdisciplinary and systems view we're advocating. \_

Mumford was unique among American intellectuals for combining what were already separate fields of inquiry, distinct specializations—science and technology on the one hand, culture and society on the other. The two cultures did not exist for Mumford in separate spheres; as a boy he had enjoyed fiddling with radios as much as reading classical literature, and for most of his long life, he saw his main task as bridging the infamous two cultures or at least bringing inquiry about them—together. He didn't combine the cultures by reducing one to the other, but by transcending them both and operating on what might be termed a meta-level of reality, where totality exists. It was by trying to be all-encompassing, by seeing the world in terms of patterns, processes, cycles, that is, by adopting an organismic world view that one could overcome specialization. In this respect, Mumford was inspired by Whitehead, as well as by Patrick Geddes, in thinking of society and its activities through biological concepts, in terms of life processes. ([www.easst.net/review/march1995/jamison.shtml](http://www.easst.net/review/march1995/jamison.shtml))